



Maximizing Veterans Eligibility for Federal Benefits

By John Lee, Director, Department of Veterans Affairs

One in every nine citizens in Washington State is a veteran. The 2000 US Census reported more than 670,000 veterans living in our state. In addition, there are more than 60,000 active duty troops working in our military bases and living in our communities. Veterans' and their issues cut across all socioeconomic lines and influence our city, county and state governments' ability to serve citizens at large.

The injuries and illnesses that veterans endure as a result of their honorable military service can be visible, but are often deep and invisible. Many veterans who served during the Vietnam War are fighting various forms of cancer, Hepatitis C, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Their children may have congenital conditions such as Spina Bifida, which has a direct correlation to Agent Orange, a jungle defoliant used during the Vietnam War. Other veterans, particularly those deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, return with conditions influenced by combat exposure, geography and other environmental factors. These veterans and family members are eligible for VA health care and monetary compensation in many cases, but have not accessed their benefits for a variety of reasons.

When veterans apply for, and receive VA health care, the resulting costs shift to the federal government, and decrease their reliance on state assistance programs which frees state resources to care for other needy citizens. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) compensation and pension dollars are typically spent in local communities, generating sales tax revenue for cities, counties and the state. This income also contributes to the economic viability and independence of those who are in receipt of those dollars, and often prevents catastrophic events such as homelessness.

The Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS), in partnership with the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA), is identifying hundreds of veterans and spouses in community nursing homes eligible for benefits for which they were previously unaware. This partnership erased lines related to data sharing, health information protection and other obstacles that often prevent agencies from collaborating. As a result, veterans and other family members are receiving health services funding through the VA, Tricare, and other federal programs. Medicaid and other state resources are being reallocated to other critical programs or clients.

The WDVA is poised to work with health care and social services providers to ensure every veteran in Washington State has the opportunity to learn about and apply for his/her benefits. WDVA's Service Officer Network has the expertise and access to the VA system to verify eligibility and develop disability, survivor and other claims. Community providers such as physicians, nurses, counselors, homeless services staff and state agencies that work with those

who are in need must ask the question: "*Have you ever served in the military?*" This simple question is the beginning to connecting a needy veteran, widow or eligible family member to the largest health care network in the nation and ultimately improving the living condition of some of our most vulnerable citizens.

WDVA is building capacity to provide veterans benefits information and services to our communities through partners such as DSHS, Employment Security, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Military Department, Department of Health, Faith Based, Community Non-profit and Veterans Service Organizations.

Veterans served and continue to serve this country with honor. Conditions and illnesses developed as a result of their service will be addressed by the federal government when our health and social services providers make the connection. Have you ever served in the military?